

Chanticleer opens CCMS season with an ode to nature (Sept. 24)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Chanticleer's widely-varied program "Music of a Silent World" opened the Cleveland Chamber Music Society's 75th season on Tuesday, September 24 at The Cultural Arts Center at Disciples Church in Cleveland Heights.

Throughout the two-hour performance, Chanticleer brought a lovely and well-blended group sound, faultless

intonation, and an extraordinary stylistic range — from German romantic to Sondheim. Tim Keeler is the group's Music Director, and Chanticleer performs without a conductor. Their remarkable group sound is a tribute to the lovely mixture of predominantly lighter male voices — six countertenors, three tenors, and three baritones/basses.

This program centered around selections from Majel Connery's song cycle *The Rivers Are Our Brothers*, whose declamatory lyrics readily identified the messengers ("I am the air," "I am a cloud," "I am a river"). The honeyed singing of the choir wafted in the hall like a scented forest. "The goal," says the composer, "is to give nature a voice...to allow these vibrant things to speak on their own behalf." Descriptions of nature's resistance ("I Am a Tree... I am a conjurer. I can regenerate...") and the varied and accessible musical language — evidence of compositional regeneration — gave us hope.

Chanticleer has a knack for interesting programming, unafraid of putting well-crafted new music alongside music from the past. There are always American songbook selections, jazz, or familiar Broadway tunes, but the combinations and sequences are surprising and friendly enough to satisfy an array of audiences. The singers were mostly effective announcers of works, though their sung German was more convincing than spoken renditions. Pacing was thought-out: sets were occasionally performed *attacca* (without a break — generally with more serious works), and occasionally with gaps,

letting applause in.

Music from the German-born composer Max Reger was paired with Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust," and renaissance composer Heinrich Isaac's cheek ("Cibavit eos" and "Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen") pressed up against Sondheim's jowl ("I Remember").

Reger's rarely-performed *Ten Songs for Male Chorus* was a special treat — four movements were interspersed throughout the program, each welcomed like a favorite uncle at Christmastime. Reger's reputation for elaborate chromaticism precedes him, but his harmonically complex songs were separated by two simpler sentimental and nostalgic songs. *Abendständchen* featured a graceful baritone solo.

In the "Water" (River) set, Mason Bates' arrangement of the Peter Gabriel song "Washing of the Water" stood out. Gabriel's work was familiar and accessible, but Bates added contrapuntal lines and vocal effects that imitated flowing water, creating something entirely new and surprising.

A new commission from Chanticleer's composer-in-residence Ayanna Woods, called *I miss you like I miss the trees*, returned to nature as a theme, this time with a feeling that was intense and poignant.

The remainder of the program was devoted to audience-friendly fare: Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now," the traditional "Shenandoah," and Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" to close.

Chanticleer received a well-deserved standing ovation lasting several exultant minutes.

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